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EIGHTH-GRADE COMPOSITION BY PROJECT

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Socialization or democratization of the school has become an ideal in education. Teaching by project is a sane, direct method for reaching that ideal.

Even a casual survey of this method reveals infinite opportunities in the presentation of almost any subject. Projects on local government, politics, public utilities, and community interests give life and value to civics. Geography and history present countless topics as profitable projects. But nowhere is this method so valuable or adaptable as in English composition. It is the "open sesame" to the heart of life for the child, a tangible interest, and for the teacher, a hold on that precious, elusive spirit, motivation. That alone must have an appeal to the teacher, though we are prone to be skeptical about any new venture in teaching, until an actual experiment has proved its worth. Such was my experience in project teaching.

I went into the work with rather a mad plunge. Ideas on project work had begun to seethe in my mind, but I had the mistaken notion that that was the type of work to be led up to, the climax of a carefully guided eighth-grade evolution. That it should rather be the initial step in this evolutionary process was one of the big lessons my experiment taught me.

I had planned that some time during the semester I would develop the project idea through the story-telling method, by the oral giving of experiences related to a topic of common interest. This was to be followed by oral themes presenting processes in industrial classes or about objects of individual construction. Near the close of the semester I hoped to work out a few simple community projects. A sudden suggestion for a "Live in Virginia" project, by one of the supervisors, precipitated my plans. This

project was to cover all the leading features of the town and presented wonderful opportunities, but seemed too big an undertaking with a class that would be leaving for high school in three months, for it appeared to be a year's work. It would be unfortunate to take up such a problem superficially or leave it in mid-air at the end of the semester. We decided not to attempt it.

The idea, however, was too tantalizing, and it continued subconsciously working, recurring with additional suggestions, through all the breaks in the day's routine and through the evening. My crude outline resulted in crystallized definiteness next day with suggestions and elaborations from the supervisors. The plan was approved; the experiment was on.

A thorough canvass of the subject gave me thirty topics that would need to be handled in order to cover the work. These included the history of the city, its advantages due to location, its schools, churches, library, Virginia as a melting-pot (we have many foreigners), open-pit and underground mining, all the other important industries, public utilities, government, and other phases of the city's life, ending with a chapter on suggestions for improvements in the city. The entire project was so divided into minor ones that it could be carried on and completed by two classes of about equal ability.

These classes were organized into booster clubs, one as "The Cheerful Class of Boosters," the other, "Thrifty Boosters." Both, choosing by vote from a list of mottoes, selected "We are Virginians as Well as Americans." The children were wildly enthusiastic about the plan. It had the appeal of reality and worth-whileness which held their enthusiasm throughout the term. The entire class period on Friday was given over to the club meeting, which was conducted by the children alone. We covered four topics a week, two in each class, by the following plan.

I divided both classes into groups or committees of three, being careful to have at least one in each group with a reasonable amount of initiative, but mixing groups promiscuously as to boys and girls and chums. The topics were rather carefully assigned to each group with regard to appeal or interest. I had rather anticipated some evidences of dissatisfaction, fearing that everyone would wish

to investigate such topics as underground mining and night school in preference to climate, garages, and the like. But invariably the president's announcement of the committees for the following week was met with beaming gratification.

As soon as possible after each assignment on Friday, I made an appointment with each of the four committees for a brief survey of the given topics, and together we made a general outline as a basic guide. Sometimes it was necessary to direct the research work at the library, in the use of card catalogue and reference indexes, or in the selection of books that might contain desirable material. Whenever practicable I went with the group on a trip of investigation, urging always on such occasions free and individual questioning, on the part of the pupils. These trips were interesting, illuminating experiences for me as well as for the children, and any attendant discomforts were endured with more enjoyment than toleration. Being spellbound, we did not mind partial suffocation at the foundry during the glowing, fascinating process of casting. The great, raised doughnuts, direct from the smoking cauldron and thickly sugared, eaten in the bakery in the face of the public, while we marveled over the huge troughs of dough and the revolving, gas-heated oven, were the best any of us had ever tasted. At the mine we were so busy swallowing and digesting various information, absorbing blue prints, and inspecting the underground works in imagination, since the law would not permit our inspecting them in person, that we were quite oblivious to surface slush, gray sky, and wholly unbeautiful scenery. When one is in contact with these realities and their possibilities, the crude surface rawness holds a great fascination. This mine expedition might serve as an example to illustrate our procedure.

The committee met for deliberation and discussion of the topic. An outline was made and essential points for inquiry decided on. Since there was a strong possibility of our being permitted to make the tour underground, the children secured the required permits from home and hunted up old clothing that would defy any discomforts or dirt, for friends warned us that we would need to creep at some stages of the game. For two weeks we accumulated curiosity and excitement while we waited for favorable weather, free hours, and the very essential convenience of mine officers.

To these men, by the way, and their genuine interest and desire to help we are indebted for the thoroughness and enjoyment of our expedition. They had made all arrangements, even to appointing a body guard for each of us in case we went underground, and were generously giving us their time. This co-operative interest of the people with whom our various projects brought us into contact was very helpful and encouraging. In every case I found them eager to make our venture a success. Without that spirit I should have found it very difficult to carry the projects through.

It was rather distressing to discover at the eleventh hour that the law absolutely forbade our going underground, that the day was one of slush and was very gray, besides. Nevertheless we were undaunted. The trip was still a venture into the unknown, and we were to have a real conference with men who knew simply everything about a subject that to us was hazy and mysterious and very tantalizing. Arriving at the mine after a half-hour's walk, we were gratified to find that the superintendent's time was ours while we wanted it and that he was most willing to satisfy our quest. I was secretly amused to note the evident rise of anticipation depicted on the faces of my three young companions when they found themselves relieved of their coats and given temporary possession of the office. They seemed to feel that the very air was pregnant with desirable knowledge. They began at once, like sponges, to absorb atmosphere, and when maps and charts were brought out their eagerness grew. Blue prints became really lucid with our instructor's pencil sketches and explanations. We studied various ore-bed formations and learned how their location, shape, and size are determined. From the sinking of the shaft and the construction of the motor drift we followed the processes in mining. The most thrilling topic was the cave-in of the "back" ore, that is preceded by days of cracking, explosive warning, and followed by such a compression of air that loaded ore cars are lifted off the tracks and careless loiterers are carried many feet up the shaft. It was at this point that wide-eyed Chester exploded into, "Oo! What!!"

Other topics discussed were timbering, temperature due to wood decay in old mines, ventilation, grade of ore, output, safety devices, number and type of employees, and wages. Throughout, the children asked questions, and the chairman used pencil and notebook.

After the indoor lesson we went out to inspect surface structure and machinery and as far as possible connect up the information obtained. We visited the machine shop and the engine room. Here the chief object of interest was a huge, cable-wound drum which a man operated with a set of levers and the help of a clock-like indicator and bell signal, to raise and lower ore cars in the shaft. When we came to the shaft itself, we were kept at a safe distance while the doors were unlocked to disclose the great, gaping, black mouth. Near by was another opening or shaft covered, except for a small manhole, in accordance with a previously described safety regulation. That it had a fascination was shown in the reluctance with which the children followed to the timber piles where the posts were made ready for timbering. Our final attention was given to the great hill of ore awaiting shipment. This was a great deal to absorb in one day, and our walk home was intensely animated as we digested and organized our knowledge.

The other trips were fundamentally similar, differing only as the topics differed in breadth of content.

Afterward each group was left to arrange its own meetings for study and theme preparation. After the preliminary business of the meeting on Friday the theme was read or told, as a unit by one member, or in parts by the three. Then followed discussion, comment, and suggestions by the class. Class criticism, which is often hard to secure or to keep unbiased, became spontaneous and good-natured. The children criticized sincerely because each paper was a common interest, being a chapter for the prospective book on Virginia, which every member was anxious to make a worthy class accomplishment. After the class discussion the committees prepared their final papers, which were decorated with pen-and-ink sketches and at last bound together into a book called "The Story of Virginia" with covers made by the art committee.

The youngsters were proud indeed. There was a feeling of having accomplished something worth while, and they had unconsciously gained poise, initiative, and independence both in working and in expression. There was pride in result of effort and in creation.

This semester three classes are organized for project work. One is the "Eighth-Grade Fellowship Club" and is making a special

study of Minnesota. Another is to be "The Junior Thrift Club" with applied thrift for its study. The third is "The Evergreen Tree Club" and is expecting to study the trees of northern Minnesota. They are looking for demonstrating material and are encouraged to use their kodaks.

We are convinced that project work is worth while. The properly chosen project holds interest and secures spontaneity in effort and expression. Common interest assures common effort for improving and building up English. A teacher-pupil relation is established that a straightly prescribed class routine never attains. The spirit of fellowship lets pupils see life not only through wider wonder eyes of the imagination but gives them also glimpses through the judging eyes of the grown-up. And finally, the project is socializing in effect and helps to eliminate petty distinctions and self-seeking.